

Bi-national lab under consideration

By Kelly Hearn
UPI Technology Writer

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M., April 11 (UPI) -- A bi-national laboratory might one day straddle the border between Mexico and the United States, producing technological fixes for a range of chronic social and economic problems.

Envisioned by scientists at Sandia National Laboratory in Albuquerque, N.M., the facility would be shared equally by both countries and would churn out new technologies to improve water quality, mitigate pollution, boost agriculture production and develop a stronger workforce in both nations. The planned facility is known as the Bi-National Sustainability Laboratory.

Poverty is rife along both sides of the border. Presidio County in Texas, for example, has a 36 percent unemployment rate. The national rate is currently 6.4 percent.

"The plan is not just to help Mexico but to help this country as well," said Maher Tadros, a BNSL project member at Sandia. "The conditions near the border on both sides is unacceptable during a time of prosperity. The thrust of the research will be directed toward prosperity generation and not toward publishing papers and getting Nobel Prizes."

If funded, BNSL would be located near Santa Teresa, N.M. and Mexico's Juarez municipality. It would require an estimated \$30 million for construction and \$25 million per year in operating expenses once it is fully operational, said Vipin Gupta, another BNSL project member.

Under the plan, the United States and Mexican governments would split those costs.

"We describe it as cookie dough, something to be molded," Vipin told United Press International in a telephone interview. "In addition to the United States government, we are seeking partners in the Mexican government, in their universities, laboratories and industry."

Tadros said that any inventions and patents produced at the facility would be co-owned.

"This will not succeed unless it's a bi-national effort," he said, adding that one of the first challenges would be to find technological solutions for water quality problems in the area.

Apart from generating new technologies, the laboratory could draw from Sandia's current base of resources.

"We have special tools that are being used in the former Soviet Union to monitor public health, for example," Tadros told UPI. "We could use that same software and other telemedicine systems here in the border area to monitor and give early warning signs of epidemics."

Tadros said a delegation from Sandia is traveling to Mexico next week to meet with high level government officials.

Part of Mexico's problem, he said, is that many of its qualified engineers emigrate to the United States. The facility could be a partial correction for the so-called brain drain.

"We want to give them the chance to stay in Mexico, work and pay taxes there to fund their own social programs," he said. "Essentially, we're trying to use

technology to improve people's lives so they don't fight with each other. We are talking about employing this same strategy along other borders such as in the Middle East."

"It certainly sounds like the kind of thing we need here," said Jake Brisbin, executive director of the Rio Grande Council of Governments, a social agency based in El Paso, Texas. "We certainly have all the critical human problems from unemployment to disease like diabetes to air pollution. These represent the kind the problems our entire nation will face in the future. So this is an ideal place to test something like that."

Thus far the idea has received at least nominal and bipartisan support from some of New Mexico's key federal lawmakers, including Sens. Pete Domenici, a Republican, and Jeff Bingaman, a Democrat.

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